

HEALTH ISSUES

Drug Exposed Issues

What Mothers Can Do to Prevent Birth Defects

Don't use the following:

- Tranquilizers, antibiotics, antihistamines, sleeping pills.
- Over-the-counter drugs, unless you check with your doctor first (Examples: aspirin, diet pills, nose drops, cough syrup, tranquilizers).
- Marijuana or other street drugs (Examples: LSD and other psychedelic drugs, cocaine, amphetamines, PCP, heroin)
- Alcohol
- Caffeine (Examples: coffee, tea, chocolate, cola drinks)
- Tobacco

Avoid the following:

- X-rays
- Exposure to contagious diseases and infections
- Overdoses of vitamins A and D
- Exposure to or use of pesticides or any cleaning, painting, or aerosol products

Reason: When a mother takes any medicine, she medicates her unborn baby as well as herself; but the baby may not react to the chemicals in the same way as the mother. Some tranquilizers are known to increase a mother's risk of having a baby born with cleft palate. Antibiotics cross the placenta quickly and, if used carelessly, may damage the unborn baby. Some sulfa drugs taken late in pregnancy disturb the baby's liver function.

Drug Exposed Infants (Continued)

Most birth defects are caused in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy when a baby's body, internal organs, and brain are being formed. The wrong drug taken at this time could damage the baby's development. In early pregnancy occasional use of aspirin may not be harmful. In late pregnancy frequent use may disrupt a baby's blood-clotting mechanism or delay the start of labor.

Scientists do not know the full effects of each of these drugs on the unborn. Drugs that cause physical addiction or that lead to psychological dependence do have a potential danger to the unborn baby. A pregnant heroin user can addict the baby and cause it to have withdrawal symptoms after birth. Pregnant women who are heavy drug users neglect their own health, and this increases the risks of their having a sick low birth weight baby.

The **alcohol** you drink flows quickly to your baby and may cause serious problems in the baby's development.

Caffeine is a biologically active substance found in coffee, tea, chocolate, and cola drinks. Some experiments using animals indicate that high doses may increase the frequency of birth defects.

Mothers who **smoke** heavily tend to have low-birth-weight babies. Newborns who weigh 5 1/2 pounds (2.5 kg) or less at birth are more likely to develop health problems in early infancy than those who weigh closer to 7 1/2 pounds (3.4 kg). Maternal smoking also increases the fetal heart rate.

Reason: Massive doses of X-rays can produce a miscarriage or birth defect.

The illness of a pregnant mother can affect the development of the unborn child. During the first three months of pregnancy, German Measles can produce cataracts, deafness, and other defects in the fetus. Smallpox, chickenpox, measles, and mumps also can be harmful to the fetus.

Vitamins A and D are stored in the body. If the amount stored gets very high, it can be harmful.

Potentially toxic substances need to be used carefully and according to directions to avoid unnecessary health risks to both mother and child.

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PREGNANCY

Teacher Notes

1. Have a speaker from a local hospital or childbirth teacher discuss labor and delivery.
2. Use the book, A Child Is Born, by Lennart Nilsson or the video, "Miracle of Life", to discuss fetal growth and development.
3. Read handout "Stages of Pregnancy" to discuss each trimester and what is happening to the mother during pregnancy.

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Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)

In June, 1977, Ernest Noble, Director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, stated that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the number one problem in terms of preventable birth defects. Mental retardation, learning disabilities, heart defects, retarded physical growth, small heads, crossed eyes, small eye openings, and hyperactivity are symptoms of an FAS baby. It is estimated that 1,500 babies born each year are either retarded or physically deformed because their mothers drank too much alcohol.

Alcohol is a powerful central nervous system depressant which affects almost every organ in the body. Each time an expectant mother has an alcoholic drink, the developing baby drinks, too. Like everything else the expectant mother eats and drinks, the alcohol passes through the placenta to the baby and circulates in the baby's blood. While it may take the mother only three or four hours to get over the effect of a few drinks, it may take the baby twice as long. A baby's immature body is not as efficient as an adult's body in burning up the alcohol.

Recent evidence also suggests that fathers who drink may be responsible for fetal defects also. A study of families in which the father was a heavy drinker and the mother did not drink revealed more birth defects than in families where neither parent drank alcohol.

Heavy drinking by the mother during the first three months of pregnancy is most likely to cause fetal abnormalities, since organs and body systems are being formed at this time. Heavy drinking at the end of pregnancy causes less damage to the baby, but still can result in problems. Severe abnormalities are found in babies of chronic alcoholics. There is new evidence that even moderate alcoholic consumption during early pregnancy may cause abnormalities in the fetus. Any of the following categories is considered to be moderate consumption of alcohol:

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) (Continued)

2 ounces (60 ml) of bourbon, scotch, gin, vodka, or rum

2 twelve-ounce (360 ml) cans of beer

2 five-ounce (150 ml) glasses of wine

Sometimes expectant mothers limit their use of alcohol to special occasions. However, some researchers believe that drinking on the weekend or on a holiday during a critical fetal development stage may be just as harmful as chronic drinking throughout pregnancy.

Because of the risks to unborn children, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) wants producers of alcoholic beverages to put labels on wine, beer, and liquor alerting mothers-to-be of the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. If the FDA's advice is not followed, the U.S. Congress may pass a bill requiring health warning labels which emphasize the danger of alcohol to an unborn child.

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Teacher Notes

Letter to a Senator (FAS)

1. Divide the class into groups of four to six students. Each group is to consider itself as staff to a U.S. Senator who is considering legislation which would require warning labels regarding Fetal Alcohol Syndrome on all alcoholic beverages. Each group will develop replies with which the Senator can respond to the people who have written about the legislation. Have each student prepare a reply to two of the following four letters concerning the bill attached. Each group will select the best replies for submission to the Senator.
2. Have each group select the best letters. Each group will choose a spokesperson to read the letters to the rest of the class.
3. Discuss each letter. Would the senator be likely to sign the bill? How would the senator who received the letter feel?
4. Poll the class members as to whether they are for or against a bill which would require warning labels about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome on all alcoholic beverage containers.
5. Write individual letters, or a class letter, to U.S. senators regarding such a bill which is under consideration in the U.S. Congress.

Invite speakers from Alcoholics Anonymous, another alcoholism treatment program, or a well baby clinic to discuss alcoholism, alcohol as a substance abuse, or alcohol's effect on the unborn fetus. Present the program during an assembly or lunch time to the other students at your school.

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Letter to a Senator (FAS)

Letter number one

Dear Senator:

I strongly urge you to support and work for the passage of the bill that will require that all alcoholic beverages contain a health warning. As a doctor who has practiced for the last 15 years in California, I am deeply concerned about the effect alcohol abuse is having on newborn babies. Many new mothers are unaware of the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and possible mental and/or physical defects in a baby whose mother has drunk excessively during pregnancy. I believe that if warning labels were placed on all wine, beer, and liquor bottles, the general public would become aware of the FAS problem and that many birth defects could be prevented. The general public is unaware of the relationship between alcohol consumption and possible birth defects. Alcohol abuse is increasing, and future parents must be alerted to the risk to their unborn children.

Sincerely,
John Duport, M.D.

Letter number two

Dear Senator:

I am writing about a very important personal problem. My daughter is expecting her second child, and I am afraid she is drinking too much. I read that there is a bill before the Senate which would require producers to put a label on alcohol to warn against birth defects. Please do everything you can to get this law passed. My daughter will not listen to me. She thinks that her drinking will not affect her baby. She quit smoking because of the warning on cigarette packages. If alcohol were labeled dangerous, I think she would limit her drinking. I am so worried about my daughter and her new baby. Please help us by passing the bill to label alcohol as dangerous to pregnant women.

Sincerely yours,
(Mrs.) Mabel Moore

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Letter to a Senator (FAS)

Letter number three

Dear Senator:

I am writing about a ridiculous bill that Congress is considering. I refer to the bill that requires alcohol to be labeled as harmful to the health of unborn children. As a liquor store owner, I want to say that no unborn children will be able to read the label! Seriously, I do not think that such a label will do any good. People who want to drink will drink—label or no label. I am sure that anyone expecting a baby will cut down on alcohol, sweets, and junk food automatically. No one wants an unhealthy baby. This bill would cost the liquor industry money, and it would cost the government money to enforce it. Future parents are old enough and responsible enough to decide about drinking without interference from the government. Please do everything you can to defeat this bill.

Thank You,
George Beardley

Letter number four

Dear Senator:

I am a senior in high school, and I am writing as part of a Consumer and Homemaking Education class assignment. The teacher told us that there might be a new law stating that cans and bottles containing alcohol have to be labeled as being unhealthful for pregnant mothers. I do not think that this legislation is a good idea. I think there are too many laws already—especially for teenagers. If this bill is passed, it will scare people. I do not think drinking can affect an unborn baby, anyway. Warning labels do not do any good either. I smoke cigarettes and most of my friends do, too. None of us pays any attention to the cigarette warning labels. Do not pass another unnecessary law!

Yours truly,
John Blakely

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Children of Alcoholics

Teacher Notes

National averages and estimates indicate that one out of every four people in school may have an alcoholic parent. Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to become alcoholics than children of nonalcoholic parents. It is estimated that half of all known alcoholics come from families with at least one alcoholic parent.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is an organization whose members are working to overcome alcoholism. The only requirement for a person to join this group is a desire to stop drinking. Al-Anon, a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous, was organized for the husbands and wives of alcoholics. Alateen, an outgrowth of Al-Anon, helps teenage sons and daughters cope with their home situation. This organization gives them the opportunity to meet and talk to others with similar problems.

1. Write the phone numbers and addresses of local chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Al-Anon, and Alateen on the chalkboard.
2. Have students offer advice to the following two letter writers: In the response to the first letter, have students include the local address and phone number of Al-Anon. In the response to the second letter, have students include the local address and phone number of Alateen. Have students share their letters of advice with the class. You write the letters on the class bulletin board.
3. Invite a speaker to class from Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, or Alateen. (First poll the students to learn from which group they would prefer to have a speaker.) Have the students prepare questions beforehand to ask the speaker.

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Assignment: Children of Alcoholics

Letter number one

I am twenty-five years old and have a twenty-two-year-old wife. I think she has a drinking problem, but she says she does not. I know her parents both drank a lot, and I know she and her friends used to drink a lot before she and I got married. When I get home after work, she smells like alcohol; and, instead of fixing dinner, she wants to pour me a drink. We want to start a family soon, but I am afraid the baby will not be healthy if my wife is drinking. She says I am suspicious and do not trust her. We are beginning to argue a lot. I wish she would just admit that she has a drinking problem, and then maybe I could help her. What should I do?

Ron

Letter number two

I am 14 years old and I have a real problem. My mother and father drink a lot, and lately their drinking has been getting worse. Sometimes they come home from work late, and they have been drinking. They yell at me and my younger brother and sometimes hit us. I am afraid and embarrassed to have friends over to my house, and I am worried about my brother. We both try to do our best in school, and we do all our chores at home, but nothing seems to please our parents. I am afraid my brother is starting to drink beer with his seventh grade friends. I do not know what to do.

I do not know whether to talk to my parents about my brother or to tell them how much I worry about them when they come home late after drinking. What do you think I should do?

Lynne